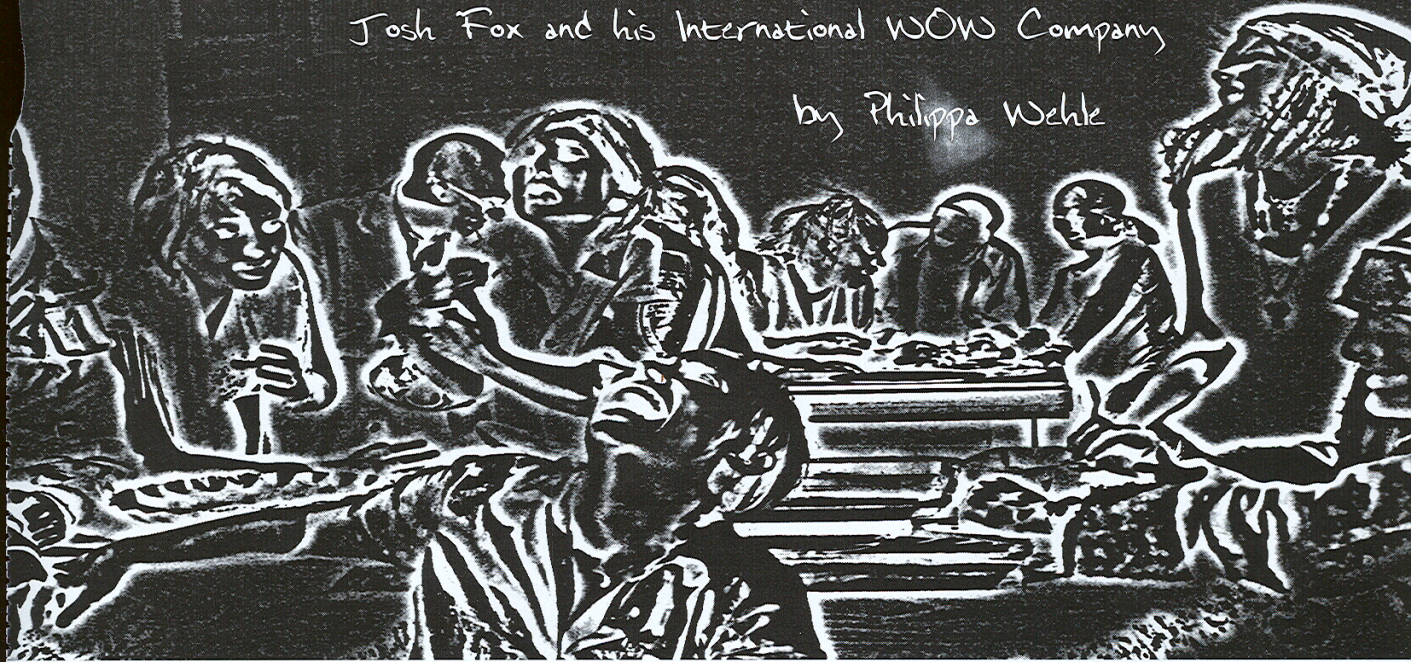


# a wild man of the theatre

Josh Fox and his International WOW Company

by Philippa Wehle



Josh Fox and his International WOW Company have been stirring up audiences at home and abroad for the past nine years with their explosive brand of theatre. In this short period of time, 32-year old Fox, founder, artistic director and lead playwright of WOW, has fearlessly produced, created, written, and directed over 30 shows in the US, Japan, Indonesia, and Thailand, most of them self-financed. His plays cover a wide range of topics, styles, and forms, from the experimental to the more traditional. Some are sprawling theatrical collages with over 30 actors in multiple roles; others are smaller, more character driven with straightforward dialogue. Whatever the form—a guided bus tour through Manhattan to a warehouse in Brooklyn to watch suicide bombers, hooded prisoners in orange jumpsuits, and National Guard trainees interact with ordinary people, or a more conventional narrative about a bunch of down-and-out guys, victims of police brutality—WOW's aim is to address the effects of globalization on today's world and explore questions of personal and cultural identity through the theatre.

Of course Fox is not alone in this endeavor nor does he want to be. Although he has become the chief playwriting voice of WOW, he favors a collective process of composition and writing to build WOW pieces. His primary interest, visible in his shows as well as his working method, is in community and to this end, he has assembled a diverse group of actors, dancers, musicians, technical and visual artists, hailing from 12 countries on four continents, who work together, in the United States and abroad, redefining community and creating innovative theatre.

Fox and friends founded International WOW in 1996 in Thailand where Fox had gone to participate as an actor in the Bangkok-Berlin-Bali "Rendezvous of Arts," a six-week festival organized by Manuel Lutgenhorst in Chiang Mai and Bangkok. They called their first piece "WOW!", a word chosen because, according to Fox, "it is used in almost every language of English origin, with the same meaning all over the world." The show opened 12 July 1996 at the Chiang Mai University, ran for a week, and then, later, toured to Bangkok along with a second WOW piece, *American Interference*.

Early WOW pieces, predominantly image-based and highly choreographed, were mostly conceived and created in Thailand with Asian actors and dancers. Because Fox was working in a different culture, he wanted to find a common language that would incorporate performance styles and methods from both the East and the West. Thai dance, Indonesian Mask Work, Suzuki, Anne Bogart's movement-based Viewpoints, LeCoq exercises, and Tai Chi became and remain part of the WOW training routine. To develop scripts for the early shows, Fox worked with English language Western plays that had been translated into Thai. From

Philippa Wehle is a professor of French Language and Culture and Drama Studies at Purchase College, State University of New York. Dr. Wehle writes widely on contemporary theatre and performance and is the author of *Le Theatre Populaire selon Jean Vilar*, *Drama Contemporary: France*, and translator of numerous contemporary French plays. She is a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters.

these, he made a collage of scenes which he had the Thais rewrite and then he rewrote these rewritings. For *American Interference*, he borrowed lines from Hollywood films of the 1940s and rearranged them to create different story lines. "It was a little like painting by numbers without an outline," as Fox describes it. He also invented a collective, reciprocal process of composition, writing, and scene building which is still used by the company today. Called *Tablework*, it has the actors work from a set of questions (questions about Nuclear Holocaust and related fears and beliefs in the case of *The Bomb*, for example). Answers can take any form: personal writing, visual imagery, scenes, choreography, music, artwork, and so forth. Once completed, Fox acts as the "textual synthesizer" of the information culled from these answers, writing scenes which he then takes to rehearsals to be rewritten with the company members, "on their feet," as he likes to say. Even when Fox has written an original script, he develops it further in rehearsals with feedback from the company. "What I write becomes influenced by who they are and what they are bringing to the work," says Fox. "I want the company to become the authors of the piece."

In WOW's early years, Fox worked mostly in Thailand, producing plays and creating self-financed international exchange and residency programs where participants trained, created, and performed a number of pieces together. The first residency lasted three months (from November 1996 to January 1997) and was attended by 25 performers from seven countries.

WOW residencies have continued on a regular basis, in Thailand and New York, with international performers working on WOW projects. Given his commitment to international exchange, Fox regularly shuttles between projects in the United States, Thailand, and now Japan where he recently finished a three-year workshop designed to create collaborations with 16 directors from seven countries, resulting in a full-length play which premiered at the Setagaya Public Theatre in Tokyo in spring 2005.

Whether in Thailand, Japan, New York City, or elsewhere, Fox continues to create new work using the basic processes he and the company have developed over the years. *The Bomb*, for example, is the result of the collaborative process by which WOW plays are collectively written by the company in rehearsal, while *The Expense of Spirit* is an original script written by Fox and brought to the actors to rehearse and make changes.

*The Bomb* is a three-and-a-half-hour collage of scenes covering more than sixty years of history, from the Holocaust to Hiroshima and beyond, with a cast of more than thirty characters. It opens on a town hall meeting somewhere in middle America. The Mayor of the town is having trouble getting the townspeople to talk about serious issues. He wants them to remember the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and relate it to the fears that are hovering over their community. They prefer to discuss approval of the kissing booth at the county fair due to open the next day, chicken dinners,

and the baseball championship game scheduled for Sunday. These ordinary lives are suddenly interrupted by the roar of an airplane and images of the atomic bomb exploding, followed by a blackout. Lights come up on a field of naked bodies, slowly awakening to a new world where little seems to have changed in the small town of the opening scenes. The baseball game goes on as scheduled, complete with cheerleader Peggy the Penguin (the team mascot) jumping up and down on the sidelines, there is more talk of preparations for the county fair as well as a production of a *Passion Play about the Creation and Destruction of the World and The Life and Times of Jesus H. Christ*, which the townspeople begin to rehearse. Scenes from the Bible and the Last Supper, with Christ wearing a baseball helmet, seem innocent enough and the wild French orgy scene, followed by a Jewish wedding celebration, are entertaining.

The lively *Hora* quickly shifts, however, to scenes of Jews being lined up and shot or forced onto trains, soon followed by an interview with J. Robert Oppenheimer, hunched over in a wheelchair, played by a Japanese actress. Later, photographs of the burned faces and bodies of Hiroshima victims are flashed on screens while McCarthy interrogates Oppenheimer, and the horror of the World Trade Center disaster is evoked through a strange conversation between Jimmy and his girlfriend Sally during which Jimmy jumps out the window but, suspended in air, continues to participate in the interchanges between Sally and their newly arrived, ash-covered friends.

These vignettes are played by a dynamic company that brings an intense physicality to every scene. WOW actors easily switch from naturalistic scenes with straightforward dialogue to shadow theatre and on to slow motion mime and freeze-frame techniques as in the tableau with performers sweeping the floor in slow motion or the mass nude scene, with naked bodies slowly rising up from a wasted land. Before one realizes it, they've changed their costumes, from baseball uniforms to evening dresses, from French cabaret garb to the business suits of World Trade Center employees. Monologues alternate with ensemble pieces, intimate scenes between couples with larger dance numbers, of which the dancing scientists in Los Alamos and the colorful Afghan dancers at Jimmy's wedding are particularly memorable as are the grim ash-covered figures in the 9/11 episode and the haunting picture of Jimmy suspended over the stage from a cable before it falls.

All of this is played out on an open space, empty but for a few wooden benches for the town meeting, a curtain in the rear on which images are projected, a ladder for a lover's kiss, or a sheet for the shadow plays. The pace is frenzied at times and slowed down at others as in the scenes of Oppenheimer's childhood and his relationships with women.

Scene after multiple scene raises questions of moral responsibility and particularly the role of the United States in creating nuclear bombs and our inability to accept the consequences of our actions. Oppenheimer seems unaware of

the effect his pursuit of the bomb has had, for example. Yet "*The Bomb* is very much a pacifist piece," Fox told *Time Out* (9-16 January 2003), "addressing America at war with itself, unable to deal with its relationship to the rest of the world."

While *The Bomb* is huge, unruly at times, and teaming with characters, Fox's latest work, *The Expense of Spirit*, is a small-scale, intimate piece that focuses on one central character and the 20 or so people surrounding her. The entire hour and 45 minute show takes place in the best video store in Brooklyn. Lights come up on a young woman frantically chopping vegetables. Another, older woman is nervously running back and forth from the stove to the counter, a saucepan in hand, getting videos to give to her newly hired employee, a young Japanese woman. Jarring music, bright lights, the loud chopping and furious pacing draw us immediately to Marty, the distraught owner of Heights Video, whose attention barely leaves the telephone on the counter, willing it to ring. It is Christmas Eve, and Marty is expecting her usual guests, an assortment of neighbors and film buffs who come every year to enjoy her famous bouillabaisse and *North By Northwest* Chicken. She is also expecting a phone call from her daughter, a soldier in Iraq, but the phone refuses to ring. Soon a motley cast of characters begins to show up: Bernie, an unshaven loner who rents videos even though his VCR is broken; Fred, whose wife has just divorced him and taken everything; Mitch, Marty's landlord who drinks too much; a professor of psychoanalysis who rents the complete Bergman section every spring; a woman Police officer with her teenage daughter with punk rock pink hair; twenty-some guests in all. Talk is of favorite videos and especially the recent demand for *The Battle of Algiers*, which only Marty can find among her 17,000 tapes.

Before these revelers arrive, however, two soldiers enter the store, clearly the bearers of bad news. To Marty, they are the enemy; they took her daughter from her, and she wants revenge. Blind with grief, screaming and sobbing, she forces them into the bathroom, locks the door and goes on preparing dinner. She will deal with them later, but meanwhile she will hold off reality by going through with her Christmas eve celebration. As the party gets started, we learn that Marty is three months behind on her rent, hasn't paid the phone bill, and Mitch is threatening to evict her. But these are the least of her worries. What will she do with the soldiers locked in the bathroom? one wonders as she plays the hostess and the guests drink and eat to excess. Underneath her feigned bonhomie, however, one senses Marty's inner state of panic, her grief which becomes increasingly tangle and which leads to the play's violent, chilling conclusion.

While *The Expense of Spirit* is a more traditional play than most other WOW pieces, Fox uses slow and fast motion techniques when he wants to show Marty's or Jo's inner feelings. At the height of the party, for example, people race about in double time, miming conversations and gobbling down the food, while Jo, who has discovered the soldiers in the bathroom, makes her way in slow motion through the

crowd. Marty, in shock no doubt, continues cooking in slow motion as if in another world. And the crowd becomes silent and goes into eerie slow motion, "like an Olive Garden commercial on crack," in Fox's words. Much of the play is in real time, but there are also numerous jumps forward in time; four or five hours of the party are condensed into about twenty minutes of stage time.

*The Expense of Spirit* had a very successful run at the Ohio Theater in New York in December 2004, and Fox hopes to revive it. Meanwhile, work continues on the *Death of Nations*, a four-part epic exploring four different countries: the USA, Thailand, Argentina, and Iraq. And in March 2005 Fox was just beginning to put out a call for actors to join him in creating a new WOW piece to be developed in New York. Called *Limitless Joy*, it will be one of International WOW's large-scale, large-cast epics. The subject? The Pursuit of Happiness and the possibility or impossibility of joy as an enduring state of being," says Fox. "It will be a journey out of the everyday world to a different kind of space, the space between dreaming and waking." The plan is to premiere the piece on Governor's Island in July 2005.

The creative process for *Limitless Joy* will be similar to previous shows with a difference. Recently the company has shifted into a new way of working that is based on the long-term relationships of a core group of WOW members for whom Fox writes roles specifically. For *The Expense of Spirit*, Fox wrote roles for specific actors within the company.

Along with these projects, there will be intensive summer workshops in New York at the WOW House, a 3,600-square-foot space in Brooklyn acquired by Fox in 2000, and of course Fox will continue his independent work as a musician and composer, sound and light designer, and actor.

Fox is also actively engaged in political activism through art. He distributed flyers during a Rainforest Action network protest at the Citigroup headquarters denouncing Citigroup's involvement with environmentally controversial projects around the world, and was he arrested. He co-created and curated "24/7 Against the War," a three-week, all-night performance marathon of artists speaking out and performing pieces to protest the war in Iraq. Fox is also a member of the Steering Committee of THAW (Theaters Against War), a group formed to bring together theatre people and antiwar activists, with the aim of developing projects that deliver a pacifist message to audiences.

Anne Bogart has written that "Josh Fox is a wild man of the theater....Watch out for him and everything he is up to." The label seems especially apt, for Josh Fox is indeed a wild man, wild to insist on realizing his concept of epic theatre with very little money, wild to hold fast to his project of creating an international community of artists, wild to believe that theatre can change society, and wild to pursue his dream of establishing a truly political theatre in these times with extremely limited resources.